

## Students Who are Undocumented and Identify as Queer

When you're a teenager and you know that you're the illegal faggot, you start internalizing what that is. And there's a kind of hardening that happens.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Jose Antonio Vargas

Next time someone asks how the contemporary immigrant rights movement came about, tell them that queer undocumented youth built it.

Perna Lal & Tania Unzueta

**R**esearch on the matter is limited, but estimates suggest there are 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Of these, recent appraisals suggest a range from 267,000 to as many as .5 million identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, etc.). Many of these are minors or young adults pursuing an education.

Despite some progress in establishing rights for undocumented and LGBTQ students, barriers that interfere with their schooling are common for these youngsters. And this is especially so for undocumented young people who also identify as “queer.”

### About Being Undocumented

Undocumented students are young immigrants who were born outside the U.S. and came here alone or with their parents and do not have official documents of entry and residence. An estimated 2 million immigrant youth in K-12 schools are undocumented.

An indication of the barriers undocumented students experience comes from data indicating that 40% of undocumented youth in the U.S. do not complete high school, and only 25% enroll in college. (In contrast, the figures for documented immigrants is 15% do not complete high school and 53% go to college.) Researchers also find that undocumented students report significantly elevated levels of anxiety and depression. And, as with others encountering significant barriers to learning at school, undocumented students generally have inadequate supports for dealing with matters interfering with their well-being.

### About Identifying as LGBTQ

Best estimates are that about 10 percent of students are LGBTQ. Many try to be “invisible” because they fear harassment (physical and verbal). Based on reports from LGBTQ high school students, it is estimated that they encounter slurs as often as 26 times a day, and 19% experience physical attacks. The impact on them is reflected in the data indicating that 26% drop out of school, and some become suicidal. Data also indicate that, while harassment is a frequent occurrence, school staff are reported as intervening only 3% of the time.

As with undocumented students and others experiencing significant barriers to staying in school, LGBTQ students find too few supports at school and often are reluctant to access what is available for fear of exposing themselves. The problem of exposure is compounded when the student is also an undocumented immigrant. In general, the combined effects of queer, illegal, and ethnic minority status raise major concerns about the impact on student learning, health, and well-being.

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## About the Intersection

Prejudice and discrimination in schools creates a stigmatizing and stressful social environment for undocumented and for queer students. When a student is undocumented *and* identifies as queer, the impact is likely to be compounded. And many of these students do not seek out help at school for fear of the consequences of being identified. Therefore, even though most undocumented and queer youth need strong support and nurturance, they remain one of the most poorly accounted for groups on campuses.

### A Student's Perspective

As one UCLA student emphasized: "Though viewing the issues faced by the undocumented and queer students respectively can offer some insight on the problems that undocumented queer students face, the experience of an undocumented queer student cannot be understood in terms of being undocumented, and of being a queer person, considered independently, but must include the interactions, which frequently reinforce each other.

For example, deeply rooted homo/heteronormativity within the queer and immigrant rights movements places many limitations on the scale of coherence between the queer and undocumented identities. ... Undocumented queer people are often alienated and excluded from both the queer and the immigrants community, hindering a healthy development of the queer undocumented identity. The combined effects of illegal status, ethnic minority status, and queer status pose a set of unique ... problems for undocumented queer students in the United States."

## Politics and Empowerment

Grassroots movements often reflect a systemic void and offer direction for changes in policy, practice, and research. The LGBTQ community has produced various grassroots activist movements. For example, Immigrant Youth Justice League, Students Working for Equal Rights, National Immigrant Youth Alliance, Dreamactivists.org, Immigrant Youth Coalition and the UndocuQueer movement. This last group stresses that the queer rights and immigrant rights movements are not parallel, but rather intersect in the fight for social justice. The movement bridges the gap between the queer and undocumented communities and has significantly increased political mobilization of the two.

UndocuQueer movement members have chosen to come out of the "double-closet" of being both queer and undocumented and demand a space in society to discuss the issues that the intersecting identities create. They are being vocal about the concept of intersectionality and are creating spaces that foster discussions between the queer and undocumented communities so that they find common ground for dealing with mutual concerns.

The movement pushes for empowerment by helping queer and undocumented individuals take back control by reducing social stigma and alienation, establishing a sense of shared existence, and enhancing resilience and personal and social competence. To accomplish this, the members of the movement have focused on creating spaces for educating, empowering, and supporting queer and undocumented individuals with an emphasis on sharing intersectional experiences and communicating their presence to the world through enhanced visibility (e.g., building hybrid cultures, creating and launching visual art, utilizing social media, organizing in person collective action).

### Addressing the Intersection

As Jose Antonio Vargas stated: "All of us are multitudes. When I see the gay pride flag, in the same way I see the American flag, I've always wondered: How included am I in it?"

To Undocuqueer movement is seen as addressing this concern. As Prerna Lal and Tania Unzueta state: "In order to acknowledge the intersectional oppression, the spaces being created, and foundational work of queer undocumented youth, members of the newly-formed National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA) coined the phrase 'Undocuqueer' as a political identity. This inspired the creation of the Queer Undocumented Immigrant Project within United We Dream to continue pushing for the inclusion of LGBT issues in immigration reform."

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/prerna-lal/how-queer-undocumented\\_b\\_2973670.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/prerna-lal/how-queer-undocumented_b_2973670.html)

### Implications for Schools

It is evident that immigrant students often find it difficult to succeed in U.S. schools, and schools often find it challenging to meet the needs of immigrant students. Moreover, as the UndocuQueer movement has grown, it has underscored the need for schools to account for students who identify as both undocumented and queer. As with too many other students, undocumented queer students' education, mental and physical health, and general well-being are threatened by persisting social oppressions and lack of appropriate resources provided by schools. All this raises the question of what is the best way for schools to address these and related concerns.

We have discussed these matters in various publications and Center documents. See, for example:

>Immigrant Children and Youth in the U.S.A.: Facilitating Equity of Opportunity at School (2015). *Education Sciences* (epub) <http://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/5/4/323/pdf>

>*About Sexual Minority (LGBT) Youth Subculture* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/lgbt.pdf>

For more of the Center's discussion of immigrant and LGBTQ matters and links to other resources on these topics, see the Center's Quick Finds:

>*Immigrant Students* -- <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/immigrantkids.htm>

>*LGBTQ* – [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3017\\_02.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3017_02.htm)

### What do involved students want?

From the perspective of the students involved, there is an immediate need to address barriers to their well-being and success at school. Activist students want schools to provide spaces that enable activities and discussions that account for all LGBTQ students and that include a focus on the special concerns of undocumented queer students.

In providing such spaces, schools need to develop ways to ensure they are inviting and open to all. They must avoid further isolating subgroups. They must engender a shared sense of commonality, purpose, and well-being. They should reflect Jose Antonio Vargas' common sense perspective that "we are stronger when we're together. We are stronger when we address not just how these issues intersect, but how we as people are multidimensional." Given this, the activities should

- not simply provide information, but encourage informed discussions about the common ground among oppressed groups and their shared goals for civil rights
- involve all staff and students in learning about the problems and issues faced by oppressed groups and ensure that students feel free to talk about their experiences
- provide information on student and learning supports
- develop leadership capacities, reduce alienation, counter bullying, and generally work to enhance a safer, supportive, and nurturing school climate for all students.

## Concluding Comments

Despite the recent accomplishments of the queer rights movement as well as the immigrant rights movement, analyses of research, practice, and policy highlight the lack of attention to discussion of the intersection queer and undocumented students. Schools can play a role in addressing this inequity.

Of course, the job of schools is not just to ensure that the needs of a particular subgroup are met. Available data clearly indicate that at every stage in the progression from pre-K-16, too many students in every subgroup are falling by the wayside. The reality is that schools are confronted daily with multiple, interrelated neighborhood, family, schooling, peer, and personal problems that require multiple and interrelated solutions.

If schools are to enhance equity of opportunity, the next decade must mark a turning point for how schools and communities address the problems of all children and youth. Needed in particular are transformative initiatives that enhance how schools work to prevent and ameliorate the learning, behavior, and emotional problems experienced by many students. This requires a policy vision for how to facilitate equity of opportunity by coalescing a comprehensive system of school and community efforts to address barriers to school success. Such a vision must encompass reshaping the functions of all school personnel who have a role to play in addressing barriers to learning and promoting healthy development. Furthermore, policy and practice must fundamentally transform how schools connect with homes and communities so they can work together in pursuing shared goals related to the general well-being of the young and society.

Equity of opportunity is one of a society's most elusive goals. Public education has an indispensable role to play in achieving this goal, but schools are hampered by fundamental gaps in school improvement policy and practice. Given the deficiencies of current approaches, the call is for new directions that move toward transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. The end product must be schools where everyone—staff, students, families, and community stakeholders—feels supported.

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## Links to Some Additional Resources

CDC provides a list of *Resources for Educators and School Administrators* and *Resources for Parents and Family Members* –  
<http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm#school>

Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Network: Transforming Schools –  
<http://www.gsanetwork.org/what-we-do/transforming-schools>

GLAAD's Queer Undocumented Immigrant Project –  
<http://www.glaad.org/tags/queer-undocumented-immigrant-project>

GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network) –  
<http://www.glsen.org/educate/resources>

Immigrant Youth Justice League – <http://www.iyjl.org>

National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs –  
<http://www.avp.org/about-avp/coalitions-a-collaborations/82-national-coalition-of-anti-violence-programs>

Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation –  
<https://www.raceforward.org/research/reports/better-together-bridging-lgbt-racial-justice?arc=1>

The Queer Undocumented Immigrant Project (QUIP) –  
<http://unitedwedream.org/about/projects/quip/>

UIC Resources – <http://www.uic.edu/depts/oaa/residency/>